U.S. Policy Towards North Korea: Context and Options

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by Edward A. Olsen

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Introduction

The United States' policies toward North Korea attracted increased attention in the wake of North Korea's missile testing on the 4th of July, 2006[1]—an occasion of obvious symbolic significance for Americans celebrating their Independence Day. That issue shall be addressed below as part of the broader evolution of U.S. relations with North Korea. The foreign and defense policies of the United States toward Korea today are increasingly complex in terms of U.S. national interests versus Korean national interests in that long divided nation.[2] To better understand the contextual legacy of those U.S. policies, it is worthwhile providing a brief overview of the historical setting which has shaped those policies.

Background

The relationship between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, has never been positive since the DPRK's founding in September 1948 shortly after a U.S./UN-backed electoral process—from which the northern Koreans abstained based on their ideological principles—led to the formal creation of the Republic of Korea (ROK), or South Korea in August 1948. North Korea perceives this U.S. interventionist policy as a causal factor in Korea's persistent division into two states within one nation. Had the U.S.-USSR allied bond of World War Two managed to persist intact into the postwar geopolitical setting, each's roles as occupiers of the northern and southern halves of the Korean peninsula liberated from Imperial Japan in 1945 could plausibly have been harmonious. Under those circumstances American-northern Korean relations almost certainly would have been equally harmonious since the United States and the Soviet Union presumably would have worked together to facilitate the convergence of northern and southern Koreans into one unified Korean nation state. That was not to be, however, because of the ideological and geopolitical factors that caused the emergent Cold War's spread from Europe to Asia and influenced the perspectives of Koreans in each portion of the occupied peninsula about the major benefactor of the Koreans residing in the other half.

To the North Koreans the United States rapidly became an adversary bent on pushing its agenda on the peninsula as part of a larger Japan-centered process throughout the Western Pacific region. Ironically the United States' South Korean cohorts were far less convinced at the time that

the United States knew what its agenda was or should be. In short, U.S. policy toward overall Korea evolved in a far less focused or goal-oriented manner than the fledgling Marxist regime in Pyongyang thought it did. Ironically that situation was changed by the Korean War and its outcome. North Korea's intent in launching a military attack designed to rescue the southern Koreans, which rapidly became the "Korean War," clearly was to undermine the ROK government by creating a conflict that Americans would perceive as not worth the costs or risks at a time when Americans were adjusting to bringing their post-World War Two armed forces home for demobilization. That approach backfired on the DPRK in terms of unintended consequences—or "blowback"[3]—which made the United States even more of the sort of international factor that North Korea disdained when the ROK was created and put the U.S.-DPRK relationship on a lasting adversarial track. The war also fostered alliance bonds between the DPRK and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) and the ROK and the United States which have had a pervasive impact on the adversarial track.

In the six decades since that transformative period in U.S.-Korean relations, mutual U.S.-North Korea policies have remained contentious.[4] Even the end of the Cold War, which was a catalyst for improved U.S. interactions with nearly all of the states that abandoned their Communist agendas as well as a couple of prominent examples that did not (i.e., China and Vietnam), did not restructure U.S.-DPRK relations. North Korea, like Cuba—albeit contextually very different, remained a remnant of the Cold War. Unlike Cuba's virtually non-existent threat potential vis-à-vis the United States, North Korea in the post-Cold War era was bent upon strengthening it strategic deterrence capability to compensate for what the end of the Cold War had eliminated from the DPRK's alliance-based geopolitical structure via the termination of the Soviet Union.

This situation was made more acute by the ways U.S.-PRC diplomatic and economic relations had normalized to an extent that North Korea could no longer rely to China to fulfill the sort of strategic commitment that had characterized PRC-DPRK relations in the post-Korean War phase of the Cold War era. While North Korea was well aware that U.S.-PRC relations retained elements of strategic tension caused by American anxiety over China's role as a rising power in Asia, that context did not mean that China would necessarily be an active player in what both the PRC and the DPRK still referred to as a "lips and teeth" strategic dynamic. The post-Cold War environment for North Korea also was altered by the rapidly growing economic rapport between the PRC and South Korea and by the ways that support tended to exacerbate already existing tensions within ROK-Japan relations. North Korea was in an odd position of empathizing with South Korea versus Japan because they are fellow Koreans, but also being concerned about the ability of the combined power of the U.S.-Japan allies to influence ROK strategy within the regional balance of power.

The net result of all these factors for the DPRK was to be left in circumstances where its past rhetoric about a juche (self-reliance) national paradigm[5] had to be adapted to real world conditions compelling North Korean leaders to deal with their remnant of the Cold War as an intense threat to the DPRK's survival. This led North Korea to pursue what amounted to hyper-nationalistic economic and military options in their half of the Korean nation that were in sharp contrast to South Korea's strikingly internationalist and globalist approaches on these policy fronts. On the economic front North Korea's quest for self reliance proved to be disastrously mismanaged and out of step with prevailing international economic standards. That situation was made worse by weather-inflicted agricultural crop problems that, in conjunction with North Korea's systemic economic problems, threatened the DPRK with so many vulnerabilities that many analysts assumed North Korea was on the path to a collapse scenario.[6] That has not happened because of the DPRK's clever use of diplomatic brinkmanship, but North Korean anxieties about such socio-economic problems reinforced Pyongyang's desires to become a bastion of strategic juche via strengthening North Korea's means to deter potential threats by developing advanced weapons. As is widely known, the focus of this effort was on nuclear arms and missile delivery systems.[7] As North Korea pursued enhanced deterrence in ways that caused many observers in the United States to perceive it as a growing threat, U.S. policies in the Clinton and George W.

Bush administrations were profoundly influenced. The effectiveness of those U.S. policies and the merits of alternatives to contemporary U.S. policies shall be addressed in the remainder of this analysis.

Post-Cold War / War on Terrorism Context for U.S. Policy Toward North Korea

Overall U.S. adaptation to the post-Cold War era was characterized by the first president Bush as adjusting to a "new world order." To the extent that Bush administration fulfilled the new world order vision by assembling the Gulf War coalition and leading that coalition to a dramatic victory which widely publicized U.S. military prowess and advanced weaponry, it sent signals worldwide about the United States' geopolitical stature as the sole superpower. As much as some conservative critics scorned his usage of "new world order" jargon formerly widely used by the U.S. liberal-left, the way President Clinton and the current President Bush have adapted U.S. foreign and defense policies to Wilsonian interventionist internationalism tend to reinforce the notion that the United States is bent on establishing some form of a new world order shaped by American hegemonic ambitions based on being the sole superpower.[8] Against this evolving internationalist background the United States became engaged—or entangled, depending upon one's perspective—in several overseas commitments to spread Western democratic values and stymie authoritarian regimes during the Clinton years.

Amidst these internationalist policies the United States was confronted by North Korea's resistance and active pursuit of a nuclear weapons option. There is ample reason to believe that the North Koreans were motivated by the Gulf War's televised display of U.S. power and by its legacy for the Clinton administration's approach to globalism. This situation reached a palpable crisis stage on the cusp of war during the spring of 1994. North Korea's experimentation with its nuclear agenda had sporadic roots back into the 1950s, '60, and '70s, but became more credible in the 1980s when after signing the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (1985) it dragged its feet in permitting the NPT's enforcement office—the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency)—to scrutinize what was occurring in the DPRK. As tension escalated, the United States' initial approach was cautiously gradualist. That changed as a result of a growing debate among American non-proliferation activists and American hawks regarding the virtues of not appeasing the DPRK's pressures, yielding a de facto Clinton preemption strategic policy in 1993-94, well before the post-9/11 Bush preemption doctrine. This led the United States to the cusp of war with North Korea which was avoided via tense diplomacy that yielded the 1994 Agreed Framework and the creation of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) which was intended to provide North Korea with what it claimed it wanted energy-wise in exchange for counter-proliferation concessions. This deal proved to be very controversial in the ways it stirred hard-line U.S. critics of both the DPRK and the Clinton approach to internationalism.

The apparent resolution formally persisted over the years since it was launched, but neither North Korea nor the United States fully lived up to what had been agreed upon. In turn, this caused critics of each side to cast blame in ways that complicated the stagnating situation. Had the 9/11 attacks and the United States' Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) not materialized, it is likely that U.S.-DPRK frictions over this set of nuclear issues would have grown in importance, escalating from its relative prominence in the second term of the Clinton administration. During those years the DPRK regularly engaged in diplomatic brinkmanship designed to push the envelope in ways calculated to achieve one or two goals. One objective was to get the United States to acquiesce to North Korean needs-cum-desires in exchange for limited North Korean concessions. The other goal was to get the United States to take more seriously North Korea's potentials via nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction plus missile tests (starting in 1998). Collectively these goals would amount to enhancing North Korea's deterrence vis-à-vis the threats it perceived emanating from U.S. policy globally and regionally.

The advent of the post-9/11 and GWOT strategic atmosphere for the United States also changed the dynamic of U.S. policy toward North Korea and its nuclear agenda. Because of the ways North Korea's rogue state geopolitical demeanor echoed some of the radical attributes of Middle East-rooted terrorists that some in the Bush administration linked to the authoritarian regimes in Iraq and Iran, the United States lumped the three of them together in the infamous "axis of evil." Because of the provocative and assertive ways the Bush administration was poised to take preemptive action against potential threatening states and non-state entities, including North Korea in an "axis" with those two Middle Eastern states was controversial in terms of the logic behind the decision and in terms of North Korea's reaction to being categorized in that manner. That U.S. decision had major consequences for U.S.-DPRK relations and for U.S.-ROK interaction over how best to deal with North Korea.[9]

Against the background of a hard line U.S. posture versus North Korea in a post-9/11 atmosphere, the Bush preemption doctrine clearly sent signals to Pyongyang's leadership cohort that they might be one of the subjects of a broad-based U.S. regime change agenda. That signal was made clear by Vice President Cheney vis-a-vis North Korea in December 2003 when he said "We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it."[10] President Bush's public "loathing" of Kim Jong-il and his often awkward relationships with South Korea's previous and current presidents—Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun—with regard to U.S. policies versus ROK policies toward the DPRK, its nuclear agenda, and the inter-Korean dialogue process underscored the tensions in U.S.-DPRK relations. Had events in the post-9/11 war in Iraq transpired more successfully and not put as much stress on overall U.S. national security policy because of the high costs, demands upon over-stretched U.S. armed forces, and American public opinion's concerns about the merits of what is being done in Iraq, North Korea might well have become the focus of the next round in the "GWOT."

Given the realities on the ground in the Middle East, the United States was not well positioned to consider any overt preemptive military moves against North Korea. Nonetheless, North Korea was in the uncomfortable position of essentially waiting its turn if the Six-Party Talks negotiations could not persuade the United States to adapt to North Korea's needs within an inter-Korean context. This gave North Korea a rationale for playing as many of its cards as was feasible in order to either induce the United States to acquiesce to North Korea's desires or to get the ROK and the PRC to put enough pressure on the United States to accommodate to ROK-PRC relations with North Korea in order to avoid having a ROK-PRC deal struck with the DPRK without the United States being part of the diplomatic process.

North Korea's efforts to do an end run around U.S. policy may yet succeed, but so far they have not yielded what Pyongyang wants other than some expressions of a U.S. willingness to not shut the door to flexible diplomacy. Were North Korea to become more flexible on the nuclear front, that U.S. readiness to negotiate could be productive for both sides. However, the DPRK so far has not demonstrated such flexibility. Moreover, the United States has chosen to use its negotiations approach on a couple of controversial fronts with North Korea. One is the human rights front in the wake of the U.S. Congress passing the North Korea Human Rights Act in October 2004. In its wake the United States has expressed interest in having a dialogue on this issue but also has made things more difficult for North Korea by admitting North Korean refugees into the United States.[11] Another front involves U.S. pressures on North Korea to conform to prevailing international standards by avoiding any involvement in illegal financial and economic activities. North Korea's alleged involvement in counterfeiting and smuggling to compensate for the DPRK's weak economy has received massive attention and turned the screws on North Korea's viability. U.S. efforts to get the international community to help block North Korean illicit activities[12] is similar to what the United States did with the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) on the nuclear weapons front which is assessed in the accompanying analysis of ROK-North Korea relations

It is no surprise that North Korea perceives such collective U.S. actions as designed to undermine the Pyongyang government, facilitating formal regime change or a readiness of the regime to change itself. While such U.S. pressures may yet work, North Korea's initial responses ranged from hostile rejection of the United States sticking its nose into North Korean affairs to what appears to have been another round of brinkmanship, in the wake of the May 2006 formal end of the KEDO arrangements.[13] This initially involved media stories about the DPRK upping the ante via another round of missile testing—this time involving a Taepodong-2 missile allegedly capable of reaching a sizeable portion of the U.S. homeland.[14] Time would tell whether the stories were based on factual intent and plausible technology, but initially this episode was another questionable example of North Korea's brinkmanship diplomacy designed to get the United States to back off, negotiate bilaterally, and refrain from exerting too much coercive pressure on the DPRK. After North Korea's 4th of July missile fireworks attracted massive attention worldwide that raised numerous questions about both North Korean motives[15] and American capability to respond effectively, U.S. officials scrambled to point out North Korea's ineptness, rally allied support, and cope with U.S. strategic vulnerabilities in the region.[16] It rapidly became clear that the immediate threat the United States confronted was far more diplomatic than military in nature, although the latter remained latent if either U.S. diplomacy utterly failed or North Korea were to become boxed into a corner of desperation by its own brinkmanship.

Western speculative and alarmist media coverage about North Korea's missile agenda also played into North Korea's brinkmanship diplomacy on a regional level. U.S. anxiety and indirect threats of preemption tend to drive South Korea and the PRC closer together. U.S. pressures on Beijing and Seoul to conform to U.S. policy agendas vis-à-vis North Korea do not go down well in either capitol because of Chinese and South Korean apprehensions about U.S. motives and the evident rapport between the United States and Japan regarding North Korea.[17] This is consistent with South Korea's "balancer" policies advocated by President Roh that are indicative of a rift in U.S.-ROK relations.[18] Significantly this situation also reinforces ROK-PRC efforts to provide a socio-economic rescue package intended to bolster North Korea's ability to merge with South Korea harmoniously in a unified Korea.

Oddly North Korea's ham handed missile policies could contribute to the DPRK's objective of weakening U.S. resolve by raising questions about the soundness of U.S. policy. However, the missile issue is far less likely to be directly influential than another salient issue. The best chance North Korea stands for achieving that negotiations goal is for the United States to find itself in a domestic societal bind caused by U.S. policies in Iraq—possibly expanded into Iran—that would be reminiscent of the societal upheaval spawned by the Vietnam War. While there is no plausible connection between these two wars on the operational front, there could be plausible linkage in terms of domestic popular reactions. Assuming North Korean analysts who have the ear of the Pyongyang leadership elite are sufficiently familiar with the U.S. domestic debate about the merits of questionable wars—past, present, and future—it is entirely plausible that North Korea might try to encourage circumstances in which American activists are likely to exert pressure on Washington to reject escalation of U.S. hard line pressures on the DPRK vis-à-vis its nuclear weapons or missiles agendas to the point of risking a costly war, in both fiscal and human terms, that can be avoided by a more prudent and balanced approach to the spectrum of issues at stake. This would include greater use of U.S.-DPRK bilateral dialogue processes and more U.S. reliance on the ROK-PRC brand of engagement with North Korea.

Alternative U.S. Policy Options Toward North Korea

While existing U.S. policy toward North Korea is unlikely to be jettisoned as long as the Bush administration is in office, there are some alternative options that can, or—in one example—must, be contemplated by this administration and/or its successor. Three shall be succinctly assessed. One involves an issue that has been around since the Korean War Truce was signed—namely when and how to devise a Korean peace treaty. This is an issue that periodically attracts attention,[19] but has not acquired much stature in U.S. policy circles. Since it would of necessity

compel U.S. policy to deal with North Korea on a more equal level than the United States routinely does and in the process would compel the DPRK to deal with the United States with greater credibility than it routinely does, the process of fostering a peace treaty could be a very useful supplement to existing U.S. policy. Such a treaty might simply be a replacement for the truce, involving the same signatories, but it would be better to involve the ROK—given its changed perspectives—and in the process make the proposed peace treaty part of the process of generating a dialogue supportive of and contributing to inter-Korean reconciliation leading to Korean reunification. This could be a productive option that might be contemplated.

A second option that also is very "optional" is to adapt U.S. policy to the learning curve exemplified by South Korea's policy shifts in the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations' focus on constructive engagement with North Korea designed to induce productive reforms in the DPRK. The underlying principle behind the ROK's engagement policies is to avoid a Korean version of German unification that South Koreans are certain would be far more costly and traumatic for the ROK than it was for the former West Germany. South Korea's policies are intended to peacefully and productively narrow the existing gaps between the two Koreas so that the Northerners will learn why they should aspire to merging with the South on mutually supportive terms and the Southerners will learn how to deal with the North on a more equitable basis. In short, there are many positive aspects of South Korea's policies toward North Korea on the unification front from which the United States could learn and make U.S. policy more effective and more productive. Getting U.S. policy makers and their advisors to consider this option in a serious manner will require a concerted effort,[20] but it is a possibility worth exploring.

Lastly, there is an option that the current Bush administration and whatever administration replaces it—conservative or liberal—must contemplate, namely how to deal with the issues attached to North Korea at the same time as the United States adjusts to whatever changes may or may not occur in South Korea after its 2007 national elections, followed by the United States' 2008 national elections. Depending upon who prevails in both the United States and the ROK there is a spectrum of ideological combinations that will influence the prospects for U.S. policy towards North Korea. There could be a mixture of conservatives and liberals as presently configured or reversed—with a conservative president in Seoul and a liberal president in Washington. Or, there could be either conservatives or liberals in both the White House and the Blue House. Given this spectrum and how North Korea might react to each variation, it is essential for U.S. policy makers to contemplate the consequences of continuity or drastic change—for better or worse—upon the viability of existing U.S. policy versus future U.S. policy. While the present U.S. administration and the successor it would desire have obvious reasons to try to shape that future's environment, they also have reasons to hedge their bets and try to accomplish as much as they can while they can.

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